

Remarks from James Riffenburg  
Regarding FCC 05-311 Cable TV Franchising

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My name is James Riffenburg and I am resident of Virginia. I am retired from the military and have spent much of my career right here in the Commonwealth; along with my wife and our children, we have lived in Spotsylvania County for the past 6 years. We consider ourselves to be typical, hard-working, family oriented citizens. Having access local community programming and timely information on school closing is a big priority in our home and it is why we are advocates of reasonably priced cable TV programming.

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Coalition Press Conference¶  
Friday, December 2, 2005 – 10:00  
a.m.¶  
Omni Hotel, Richmond¶

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As a consumer I have been very dissatisfied with my local cable service: service is unreliable, picture quality is unacceptable, technological advances like HDTV are slow in coming, and last (but certainly not least) the service is overpriced. Like in most localities in Virginia, I am served by only one cable provider. Simply stated, if you live in an Adelphia neighborhood (as I do) you subscribe to Adelphia cable service; if you in a Cox neighborhood you subscribe to Cox cable service. What we need are more cable choices...now!

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The intent of the Cable Act of 1992 and Telecommunications Act of 1996 was to level the playing field so new entrants could provide voice, data, and video services. For years I have been able to pick up a phone and easily switch my choice of long distance telephone provider. Since 1996 I have received broadband Internet from my Cable provider and, recently, cable customers are able to sign up for telephone service using voice-over-IP (VOIP) technology from the cable provider. So why is it that in March of 2006 I can only receive cable TV from one...single...sole provider? Again, citizens need more cables choices...the current cable TV franchise process has been nothing less than a barrier to new entrants!

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I am, in fact, a supporter of cable TV. However, do to a lack of cable choices, I have been forced to seek alternative sources of video programming. I have been receiving video service from Satellite providers and have had to erect two over-the-air antennas over the past two years. I did this so I may enjoy the best quality and most affordable video service available. While I have enjoyed my VOOM and Dish Network satellite services, I probably wouldn't have left cable if I had more choices. My local provider did not provide a quality picture, enough High Definition channels, nor provide what I deemed to be reliable and affordable video service. I simply had no cable choices.

There was no incentive for my cable provider to improve service since there was no direct competition. While satellite may compete indirectly with cable, they DO NOT compete directly with cable. Satellite does not provide local public access channels. All things being equal, I would prefer subscribing to a local cable provider since I know part of my programming fees are going to good use in my community. Plus, many residents do not have line of sight to the satellite orbital locations nor do they want one or more dishes mounted on their rooftop. Satellite may be an alternative to cable, but it is not a direct competitor since it does not provide local community programming nor does it generate local tax revenue through franchise fees.

Since April 2004 I have actively engaged other consumers in discussion regarding the need for cable choices and advanced video technologies through my web log at [www.satelliteguys.us](http://www.satelliteguys.us). It is important to understand why these Internet Forums, like SatelliteGuys.US and hightechtv.net, are so popular. It is because consumers are looking for...no, they are begging for better TV, more reliable service, and more affordable video alternatives; they desperately want Cable Choices Now!

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Eager for alternatives to my current cable service, I contacted Verizon and my local cable franchise authority early last year to inquire when they would be offering their high-speed data and video service in my area. That's when I learned about the lengthy process by which Verizon and other companies have to go through to bring consumers more choices. This process not only is lengthy, but it discourages competition from coming to most localities. Specifically, after discussion this issue in great length with members of my local Telecommunications and Cable TV Commission, I have concluded that members were more willing to fight to maintain status quo and placate the needs and desires of Big Cable, than fight to bring the citizenry additional cable choices.

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It is a matter of public record that Verizon Virginia Inc. has been negotiating a Cable Franchise agreement with my local officials for over 16 months...and counting. Yet the process is stalled in lengthy, burdensome, bureaucratic processes that do not serve the public interest. We shall never have competition until state and/or federal laws are changed, and these good old boy networks are removed from the cable franchise approval process! Local communities will still receive franchise fees and receive community services, but the powers that impede progress will be removed or will hopefully be made irrelevant in the franchise approval process. You can read in the news all the nonsensical ranting these individuals (NCTA, Adelphia, Cox, Comcast, Time-Warner, etc.) are making in the attempt to keep competitors, like Verizon and AT&T, from competing. They do not want to give up their monopolies - they do not want to have offer better and more affordable

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services to their customers - they do not wish to compete, and they do not want people to have more Cable Choices.

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Without competition, cable rates continue to rise and Big Cable's wallets grow fat, local municipalities enjoy juicy franchise fees and extort favors, and the poor consumer is stuck paying more for their cable services each and every year. Can this possibly be the desired outcome of the Cable Acts? Have these antiquated processes led to consumers having more, and more affordable, cable choices? The bottom line is that I am an average (albeit passionate) consumer who is tired of rising cable rates! I am frustrated with my lack of choices and I eagerly look forward to having more cable choices in the very near future.

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I was excited when the opportunity was presented to take part in the Cable Choice Now coalition ([www.cablechoicenow.org](http://www.cablechoicenow.org)) and, hopefully, help raise awareness of these issues. I believe that competition will benefit consumers both in terms of price and the speed with which new technologies are offered. While new technologies may not reach every corner of Virginia right away, by doing nothing – and leaving the current franchise system in place – we will certainly prevent new technologies from coming to any part of many localities.

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I trust that the Commission will review all input and make an informed decision based on fact, and not conjecture. And I trust that the Commission will take appropriate action to bring all citizens real video competition in the very near future.

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In order to be successful, we have to send a clear message to legislators that citizens are tired of rising cable rates, and want cable service choices. Citizens interested in joining the coalition and/or sending a message to their legislator, they can log onto [www.cablechoicenow.org](http://www.cablechoicenow.org). From that site anyone can enter their address and it will tell them who their legislators are and they can send them an e-mail directly from the site.